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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development

Multi-year programme of work of the Commission for 2002-2006

Statement submitted by the International Movement ATD Fourth World, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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Outcome of the Geneva special session and what remains to be done

The World Summit for Social Development undeniably contributed to building awareness of the seriousness of the situation of the world's most indigent people. A new consensus is in the process of forming: extreme poverty will henceforth be considered a denial of human rights and an intolerable violation of human dignity. It has also been recognized that the intangible right to life includes within it existence in human dignity with the minimum necessities of life.[1] States have a responsibility to encourage participation of the poorest populations in the decision-making process at all levels. The existence of extreme poverty prevents full and effective enjoyment of human rights; it weakens, and even destroys the possibility of, grass-roots participation. The process launched in Copenhagen gave a face to these populations, beyond numbers and statistics. It highlighted the fact that, in many places, the poorest are suffering from hunger and that they lack adequate housing and access to quality education. They are therefore deprived of cultural and spiritual development. They are more subject than others to disease and malnutrition and are more vulnerable than others to economic crises and natural disasters.

In order to put an end to poverty, at the special session held in Geneva, in June 2000, the General Assembly reaffirmed the commitments undertaken in Copenhagen. It decided to implement new initiatives for social development. These commitments, which provide a common reference point for the entire United Nations family, were reaffirmed in September 2000, at the Millennium Summit in New York.

At the Summit the General Assembly also decided:

(a) To halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of the world's people whose income is less than one dollar a day and the proportion of people who suffer from hunger and, by the same date, to halve the proportion of people who are unable to reach or to afford safe drinking water;

(b) To ensure that, by the same date, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling and that girls and boys will have equal access to all levels of education; and

(c) By the same date, to have reduced maternal mortality by three quarters, and under-five child mortality by two thirds, of their current rates.

It is satisfying that the international community has undertaken such clear and precise commitments accompanied by a timetable.

At the same time, in its World Development Report 2000/2001, the World Bank notes that, given the growth rate of the world population and the economic growth rate, considerable and concerted efforts would be necessary in order to effectively attain these targets in 2015. For this reason, the International Movement ATD Fourth World wishes to draw attention to the fate of millions of poor children born this year, who, owing to the slowness of the measures being implemented, will be lifelong victims of hunger; to the millions of boys and girls forever deprived of an elementary education; to the millions of parents living in roadside huts; to the millions of fathers seeking work in vain; and to the millions of mothers robbed of any hope of immediate improvement. It also notes the fate of populations who may never be reached and who will thus remain doomed to survive in misery for another generation. ATD Fourth World questions the validity of an economic approach in which the well-being of millions of people hinges on the eventuality of adequate economic growth with no guarantee, moreover — at least for the time being — that its benefits will be equitably distributed to the poorest people.

For an approach based on human rights

Extreme poverty is — in the human conscience — considered a violation of human rights, as are slavery, apartheid and torture. The exercise of these fundamental rights cannot depend on economic growth or sound market functioning. Hence, even where a poverty reduction policy might help ensure respect for certain rights, only an approach based on human rights can place man at the centre of development, as advocated by the United Nations. Such an approach should strive to ensure that every programme is designed to reach each human being for which it is intended. It would mean making an effort to guarantee that programmes are beneficial to all.

[1] See Commission on Human Rights resolution 2000/12 entitled "Human rights and extreme poverty".

ATD Fourth World therefore supports a poverty eradication approach based on fundamental rights. Only such a rights-based approach can make people and their communities the actors. It will focus special attention on the most destitute groups, since they are the ones most affected by widespread denial of rights. Such an approach begins with people themselves and fosters the necessary conditions for their effective participation. This is borne out by the fact that, under certain conditions, the poorest people are best able to speak about poverty. An approach based on the indivisibility of human rights attaches importance to all rights at the same time. Under it, participation or freedom of expression do not depend on whether or not one has an education or housing; nor do rights, such as the right of access to health, education or a decent standard of living, depend on whether or not populations are already participating or enjoying freedom of expression. A rights-based approach is global in nature and recognizes that rights are multidimensional in character. There is a growing realization that poverty means lack of income, health, education and decision-making capacity and that it is characterized by extreme vulnerability.

Only such an approach recognizes the urgency of implementing the right to a decent standard of living; the urgency of realizing each human being's right to culture, education and spirituality; the urgency, even the duty, of mustering all forces in order to eradicate extreme poverty.

Eradication of extreme poverty, the foremost responsibility of States and of the international community

The eradication of extreme poverty, it must be recalled, remains the primary responsibility of States and of the international community. It is the State's duty to establish a coherent vision of reality. The State must obtain a consensus in order to organize collective action against extreme poverty. It must establish a framework for effective action against this scourge. The State must be the guarantor of the participation and partnership of the most destitute populations. Lastly, it must monitor and evaluate the implementation of the measures contemplated, so as to adapt and correct them.

Elaboration of a declaration and steps towards a convention on human rights and extreme poverty

Following the commitments undertaken in Copenhagen, the greatest importance should be attached to the initiative of the Commission on Human Rights to consider the appropriateness of a declaration on human rights and extreme poverty.[2] This approach constitutes a first step towards a convention which the International Movement ATD Fourth World fervently hopes for. Such a declaration should clearly state that the question of extreme poverty must be addressed from the human rights perspective. The declaration should affirm the right of every human being — hence, also those who are deprived of all their essential rights, wherever in the world they may be — to live in an environment in which their human dignity is respected and to enjoy their fundamental rights fully and completely and thus be able to assume their responsibilities towards their families and communities.

It should take into account the efforts and initiatives of individuals and groups living in extreme poverty. It should reaffirm the responsibility of States and the international community and define their obligations. It should take into account the role of other actors in civil society and the private sector and promote an environment which is conducive to initiatives of all kinds, particularly voluntary initiatives. It should encourage the media to assume their role with regard to human rights education. It should define extreme poverty in all its dimensions and describe the fate of those who are extremely poor. It should ensure their participation. It should provide for local, national and international measures and take into account the cultural diversity of regions. It should draw on national or local experiences where the poorest and most disadvantaged people have indeed had occasion to cooperate in the design, implementation and evaluation of measures by participating in civil society organizations. It should prepare a course of action culminating in a convention on human rights and extreme poverty which would be built on partnership with persons living in abject poverty.

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[2] See Economic and Social Council decision 1998/250, point (f).

International Year of Volunteers (2001): the promotion of voluntary commitment

ATD Fourth World wishes to congratulate the Secretary-General of the United Nations on his note entitled "The role of volunteerism in the promotion of social development" (E/CN.5/2001/6). This note forms an excellent basis for the Commission to capitalize on this International Year of Volunteers in order to ensure that all persons, even the most destitute, are recognized and supported in their voluntary commitments to their fellow human beings. We wish to draw attention to the following passages in the Secretary-General's note:

> "13. ... The lack of awareness and knowledge about what happens below the waterline of public visibility inhibits Governments and other development actors from establishing partnerships and synergy with the very reservoirs of energetic solidarity that enable and empower society. These attributes of social capital should be seen as an indispensable component of any strategy aimed at promoting social integration, poverty reduction and sustainable development. ...
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> "28. ... The promotion of volunteering often involves the resurrection of dormant values that have always existed, be they expressed through tribal groups, village councils and mutual aid and self-help women's and youth associations, but which have been negatively affected by war, poverty or epidemics and, in some societies, by the decline of support systems such as the family and wider kinship networks and religious institutions. ...
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> "34. Another area for government action is the promotion of initiatives aimed at expanding the opportunities for volunteer contribution among excluded segments of the population. Given the sense of personal worth and the social utility that individuals and society gain from voluntary action, the right to volunteer should apply to all sectors of society. ..."

This last paragraph goes on to refer specifically to people with disabilities, older persons and refugees. ATD Fourth World would like to suggest that it should also include populations living in extreme poverty. They often make huge efforts to support others who are victims of poverty without benefiting from the overall framework which this statement sets out as an objective.

Within the context of the International Year of Volunteers 2001, the promotion of the human investment of women and men who work in the field with the most destitute groups is of paramount importance. Thus, the International Movement ATD Fourth World has put forward a number of proposals with a view to promoting such voluntary commitment. In its view, strong impetus must be given to the voluntary commitment of persons of all milieux and of all ages who are willing to contribute their time and skills.

(a) This should be done by, inter alia, fostering the participation of youth in the social development process, particularly in poverty eradication. The development of a volunteer service, for example, would be one way of doing this. Such mobilization must be a component of national policies on youth and cultural exchanges among States. Measures such as granting retirement points and scholarships, or training and follow-up guarantees, might be incentives for young persons and others to become volunteers.

(b) Within the framework of the commitments undertaken at the Copenhagen Summit, it goes without saying that a commitment to full-time volunteer work among populations living in extreme poverty should be promoted. Persons of all backgrounds must be offered the opportunity to volunteer for a number of years; a sufficiently long period is essential in order to be able to build mutual understanding, restore ties with other milieux and within the community, act in a certain spirit of equality and ensure the participation of all. Disadvantaged persons, whether working or unemployed, must also be able to benefit from such incentives as financial support or periods — comparable to sabbaticals — during which they can acquire new skills and broaden their social and cultural horizons.

(c) As for the United Nations, it should take an initiative aimed at providing incentives for volunteers from all countries and all milieux — in all parts of the world — to devote part of their time to the eradication of extreme poverty. It should establish an ad hoc working group, accountable to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, to study conditions and criteria to be established for such volunteer work, based on practical experiences; consider legal, administrative and financial modalities;

and formulate proposals with a view to creating a legal framework conducive to their implementation. Competent non-governmental organizations should be represented in this working group.

International Movement ATD Fourth World is of the view that there are two closely linked areas where volunteerism plays a predominant role in efforts to eradicate extreme poverty, namely, human activity and the promotion of artistic and cultural expression. Most of the time, the very poor are like prisoners caught in a vicious circle of alternating forced activity and inactivity. Unemployment — or chronic underemployment — seriously curtails their resources, usurps their time, preoccupies their minds and limits their availability for all other activities. It deprives them of virtually any opportunity to participate in cultural and social life. Such deprivation prevents them from finding decent work and rules out all opportunities for the harmonious development of their potential. In this context, volunteerism can make a unique contribution. For extremely impoverished persons, participation in artistic and cultural activities can open the door to new relations.

As for the discussion on employment and human activity, the objective of full employment and social integration, decided at the Copenhagen Summit, forms an essential whole for attaining social development which fosters the participation of all and benefits all. This objective requires a multidimensional strategy in which work and training must be viewed integrally with other aspects of human development: the place of each person in the community and society, and access to and participation in social and cultural life. These are all areas in which volunteerism plays a vital role.

Multi-year programme of work of the Commission for 2002-2006: Follow-up to the International Year of the Family

The International Movement ATD Fourth World supports the note of the Secretary-General on this topic, and intends to contribute to the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family in 2004. We urge Governments to bear in mind that this anniversary is of the utmost importance for families so oppressed by poverty that they have very little opportunity to maintain family ties and to express their views on these matters. We continue to see children all over the world taken from their families simply for material reasons. We know couples who live apart, simply because they are constantly seeking decent employment. Too often, government policies aggravate the tremendous pressure placed on families that are trying stubbornly to maintain family ties — ties which are all they can depend on.

The tenth anniversary must be a turning point in which families living in extreme poverty will finally be consulted as partners on policies which shape their lives. We join many members of the NGO Committee on the Family in drawing attention to:

(a) The needs and resources of families trying to survive in situations of war, refugee camps and internal displacement;

(b) The tragic fate of children living in poverty and that of their parents when they are separated from each other by the placement of children in foster homes, international adoption or exploitation.

Since the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs focuses special attention on these five main substantive themes, we are confident that it will do so in consultation with these families living in extreme poverty.